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April 2009

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**Tilling the Fertile Soil
For Such a Time As This**

**God's Clues
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FAITHFUL DISOBEDIENCE

VOLUME 22 NUMBER 3 APRIL 2009

Sometimes to be faithful to God is to be disobedient to other authorities. In the messiness and ambiguity of life, we ask for God's help in discerning the right thing to do.

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VOICES

Disobedience makes me

uneasy. I like to know and follow the rules. I figure that people smarter than I am made them, and they had their reasons. Even when there is no one around, I stop for the stop sign and use my blinker to signal the turn.

The rules make me feel safe. But not everyone experiences them that way. Before the civil rights movement in this country, the rules dictated where African American people were allowed to sit or eat or go to school or live. Those rules were unjust and deserved to be resisted. Rosa Parks took a personal risk to disobey those rules and we remember her today as a hero.

This month's Bible study session focuses on Esther's decision to help her people. The writers tell us, "Mordecai persuades Esther. She will disobey the king's rule and risk her life. Shedding her former passivity, she now takes charge. . . . She will act with *hesed* toward her people. Like the men in the fiery furnace of Daniel 3, she understands that she is risking her life."

In "For Such a Time as This," Mary Nelson tells of her mother's arrest at age 78 for civil disobedience. When she was asked why she did it, she said it was for the world's children. Nelson writes, "Like Queen Esther and my mother, we sometimes find ourselves in situations that call for faithful disobedience."

But how do you know when to act and what to do? It takes discernment. Ginger Anderson-Larson served as a spiritual director at an ELCA seminary.

In "God's Clues," she writes about her experiences with students who seek discernment: "In open conversation with others and in quiet listening to God, the Holy Spirit will let us know God's plan for us."

When we're trying to figure out what to do, we wish we could know how it will turn out. In "From Scripture to Faith," Martha Stortz reminds us that life seldom turns out the way it does in the fairy tales and we can't be sure of the ending. Yet there is hope: "No matter how far we've wandered or been wrenched away from where we thought we were going, God is there, the grace we can count on."

It takes courage to change the script even when the circumstances seem to require it. In "Applecart Lessons," Phyllis Kersten shares what happened in her congregation when the torch was passed to the younger generation—and it wasn't all sweetness and light. What would it take for the women to break out of the trap of nostalgia? Kersten writes, "What it took for the Women of Grace (Church) was for the older leadership to receive the gifts and ideas offered by the younger members for what they truly were: gifts from God, even though these ideas might threaten to turn some of their established world upside down."

This month we see the world turned upside down in dying and rising of Jesus Christ. May you be blessed by the surprising new light of Easter. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You may write her at LWT@elca.org.

Faithful Disobedience

by Kate Sprutta Elliott



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EARTH DAY

Tilling the Fertile Soil by Tony Ends

Our families and co-workers thought we were both nuts. Why in the world would we want to leave steady jobs in vocational rehabilitation and journalism for farming?

Why did we want to get our hands dirty in gardens and fields, stalls and greenhouses when we could sip gourmet coffee at a computer terminal in comfortable air-conditioned offices and collect steady paychecks with benefits?

On many levels, my wife, Dela, and I had no idea what we were getting into when we left our other jobs to establish a farmstead back in 1993. A national crisis had chopped the number of family farms from 6 million down to 3 million in just a decade. It was perhaps the most difficult time in our nation's history to begin farming.

Yet on the most important level—the level of faith—Dela and I were answering a still small voice. It's a voice easily drowned out in the noise and distraction of an urban world far from the land. It's a spiri-

tual voice, a voice that shares our earth's only hope for restoring justice, stewardship of the earth, and community.

We believe that that still small voice is best heard in nature—that created world of living miracles. It speaks to us as we study and observe, as we listen to plant life, animal life, and especially the microbiotic life in the fertile soil that God named *Adama*.

I think I first began hearing this small voice clearly 16 years ago, when we founded Scotch Hill Farm in south central Wisconsin. Dela and I'd been married just four years then.

We first met in a church service a thousand miles south of Scotch Hill. From the start, I knew I was embarking on a long journey. Yet I had no idea how important an



radically transforming the changes
ong the way would be.

I was baptized in a Lutheran
urch as an adult in Milwaukee
st after finishing graduate school
Marquette University in that city.
was on a career path in journalism,
ving to climb up the ladder from
o to job and state to state. When I
uld not find a newspaper position
ar my home, I found work with
pers in the Carolinas.

I was lonely in that secular
orld, far from my Midwestern
ots. I was searching for ways to
ake my life meaningful and work-
g very long hours. One Sunday,
went with a new friend to a wor-
ip service at an Episcopal church
Hendersonville, North Carolina.
ross the crowded room, I saw a
hile that stirred my soul. What
emed like just moments later, I
pped up to communion, and
ere again was that lovely face,
fering me the cup of salvation.

I looked at her hand and
anked God there was no wedding
g there.

It took me a while to get that
oman's attention, but I persisted.
ar first project together was to till

and plant a garden in my backyard.
Our friendship grew very quickly,
and we were married just about a
year later.

THE FARM

Early on, Dela told me she'd always
wanted a farm. I naively thought
this would be no problem. The
countryside seemed a great place
to raise children. I was ready for a
change in location.

We bought, rehabbed, and sold
two old houses in succession to
accumulate enough money to pur-
chase a farmstead. When I accepted
a job in Janesville, Wisconsin, we
finally bought what was left of a
dairy farm. No cows had been
milked here since the late 1960s.

Weathered frame buildings and
wooden fences were beginning to
fall into decay. We had no livestock,
no equipment, no experience, not
even a pickup truck.

We'd just moved and started
new jobs, so we couldn't get a work-
ing line of credit to buy the things
we needed to get started. We worked
two, three, even four jobs at one
point to come up with money we
needed to restore life to this farm.

Yet it seemed that every new life
we brought to this place spoke to
us with God's voice. The first flock
of baby chicks, fluttering and chirp-
ing. The first baby lamb, kicking
up its heels in the pasture. The first
goat kid, wagging its little tail and
chugging vigorously at a bottle of



Dela Ends tends seedlings at Scotch Hill Farm.



EARTH DAY

its mother's milk. Suddenly, we were living the creation story every day. And it was very good.

We broke ground with a spade in a paddock, walking behind a mechanical tiller, back and forth until we had a smooth seedbed. We watched our own children wiggling their toes in the moist soil.

We grew and delivered more than 60 varieties of vegetables—at first for five customers, then 15, then 21, then 35, and finally some 200 households in our 14th year. We learned about community-supported agriculture at the same time as our customers did.

When we had no money to buy what we needed to build a greenhouse, we fished in dumpsters for wood scraps to frame the building. That unheated greenhouse protected our seedlings from frost and extended our growing season from 15 to 20 weeks.

We bought used greenhouse plastic from a flower grower who was going out of business. Some 10 years later we were able to buy new high-tunnel hoop houses, renovating and improving our old make-shift greenhouses.

We raised sheep, goats, chickens, turkeys, and grasped for ways of tending them profitably. We sal-

vaged materials to build a commercial kitchen, and Dela began making goat milk soap.

Within four years, these fragrant, moisturizing bars of soap were providing a steady third of our farm income. Dela makes and we sell at least 8,000 bars of soap every year now. We've taught eight other dairy-goat farms to do this, too.

WINTER FARMERS' MARKETS

We learned to become self-sufficient. We began to find modest financial rewards in following good stewardship practices, being frugal, and working hard. Sadly, though, we realized that many of our rural neighbors were not enjoying the same success. Even the most innovative and conscientious of them confided in us about their hardships. Fearful friends talked about bankruptcy. We heard accounts of despair and suicide. We looked on helplessly at the forced auctions of dear friends' farms.

In December 2003, through an ecumenical organization called Churches' Center for Land and People, we began a project to try to address these difficulties. We organized winter farmers' markets in church parish halls around the area, later adding a festive meal of local and regional foods.

The program partnered with an emergency fund in Wisconsin called Harvest of Hope. It had been making cash grants to farmers in crisis since the 1980s. We held the first of our winter markets and meals as a benefit for the fund in a Lutheran church in Madison. Within five years, we were holding up to 50 of these events within congregations of six denominations in 20 cities in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin (see www.cclpmidwest.org).

Our organization seeks to do a lot on a tiny budget. Sometimes we succeed, drawing as many as 200 people to a host church's fellowship hall. Sometimes our weak resources get the better of us, and we're unable to inspire strong attendance.

Like Scotch Hill Farm, our initiatives for others have grown very slowly. I confess that it has been hard work, hard lessons, severe difficulties. I never dreamed I had it in me to overcome what Dela and I've come through together. A number of times, we've been tempted to give up.

But our farm, our garden, our greenhouse, our fields are our solace and our reward. Here, we're reminded of what is most important in life. Here, we're reminded of our meaning and the meaning created from our work.

T TABLE

Then we sit down to meals, with most every ingredient from our family's own growing and raising—

Dela's faithful canning, freezing, and preserving—we cannot imagine doing anything else for a living or living anyplace else on this earth.

A few years ago, I heard a Bible scholar talk about Scripture that named for me what I've come to feel in my soul for farm life: Genesis 1:7–9, 15.

“Then the LORD God formed Adam [which broadly means humankind] of *Adama* [“fertile soil”] and breathed into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life; and Adam became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he placed Adam whom he had formed. Out of *Adama*, the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food . . . then

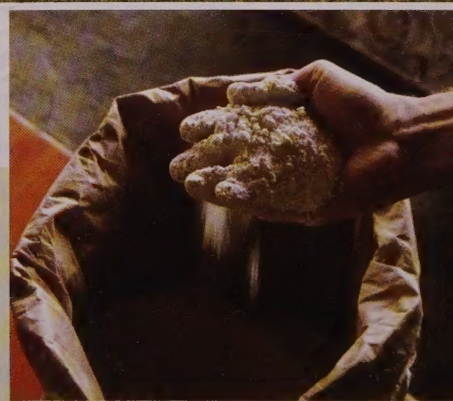
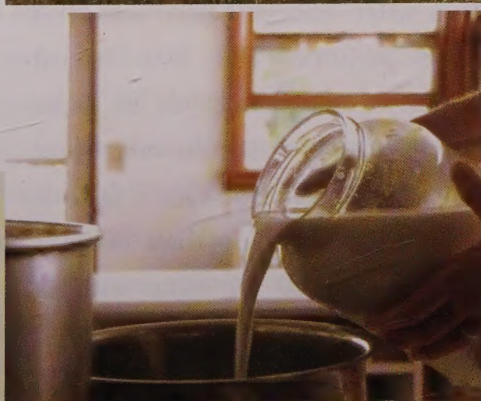
the LORD God took Adam and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” [may also be translated as “to serve it and protect it”].

By this biblical interpretation, I understand that my identity is from God’s fertile soil. My vocation is from this same soil. My relationship to God and creation is from this same fertile, sacred ground.

We’re not getting rich at what we do on our little traditional farm, yet our souls are enriched beyond measure. Earth Day for us is every day. We wish the same for you, in Christ’s love. ☸

Dela and Tony Ends have raised four of their five children at Scotch Hill Farm near Brodhead, Wis. You can read more about them at www.scotchhillfarm.com.

Photos copyright Dave Haldiman



TO LEARN MORE

Find out about Churches' Center for Land and People at www.cclpmidwest.org.

Also available is a 25-minute DVD called “Shared Values,” filmed for the Winter Farmers’ Markets and Meals for Hope project. It shows this project as a model for faith communities to connect consumers and farmers through an ecological ministry in congregations. To order “Shared Values” send \$7.50 (to cover the cost of duplication and mailing) to Scotch Hill Farm, 910 Scotch Hill Road, Brodhead, WI 53520.



CALENDAR NOTES

April

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
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This month begins with the end of Lent. When does Lent actually end? Just before the great Three Days begin; that is, Thursday at sundown, before the Maundy Thursday service.

5 Palm Sunday

The texts appointed for Palm Sunday are the same every year, except for the Gospel proclaimed at the procession with palms and the Passion. This year, we hear Mark 11:1–11 or John 12:12–16 with the procession; Isaiah 50:4–9a; Psalm 31:9–16; Philippians 2:5–11; and Mark 14:1–15:47 or Mark 15:1–39 [40–47]. Have you ever wondered what Jesus did after his triumphant entrance into Jerusalem? See the procession reading from Mark. He went into the Temple and “looked around at everything.” And the next day he came back and threw out the money-changers.

6 Monday in Holy Week

Today, Mary of Bethany—Lazarus’ and Martha’s sister—anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume. The 300 denarii that miserly Judas names as its price is nearly a year’s wages for a laborer. What extravagance! But God’s love is even more extravagant than Mary’s. The texts appointed for today are Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 36:5–11; Hebrews 9:11–15; John 12:1–11.

7 Tuesday in Holy Week

In today’s Gospel, we see Jesus’ words in verse 32 beginning to come true even in verses 20 and 21. The Greeks

who ask Philip to introduce them to Jesus are the beginnings of Jesus’ prophecy that he will draw all people to himself. Today’s readings are Isaiah 49:1–7; Psalm 71:1–14; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 and John 12:20–36.

8 Wednesday in Holy Week

Jesus knows who his betrayer is and tells him to do what he has to do quickly. “And it was night.” The texts appointed for Spy Wednesday are Isaiah 50:4–9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1–3; John 13:21–32.

9 Maundy Thursday

For the Triduum, the great Three Days we go back to the ancient pattern of counting days from sunset to sunset and the services of these Three Days are intended to begin after sunset. Tonight we celebrate the institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist, but the Gospel story we hear shows us Jesus taking the role of servant and washing his disciples’ feet—and telling us to do the same. The texts appointed for tonight are Exodus 12:1–4 [5–10] 11–14; Psalm 116:1–2 12–19; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; John 13:1–7, 31b–35.

10 Good Friday

Tonight we ponder just how deeply Jesus does love us: even to suffering and death on a cross. How do we respond to that wondrous love? The texts appointed for tonight’s service are Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16–25 or Hebrews 4:14–16, 5:7–9; and John 18:1–19:42.

Resurrection of Our Lord

Vigil of Easter

The Three Days culminate in tonight's Vigil service, which begins outside, with the kindling of a new fire. The new Paschal candle leads us into the church, where we feast on the Scriptures that tell us the story of our salvation. And then we joyfully welcome new Christians with the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. What an amazing night! The texts appointed for the Easter Vigil (my favorite service of the whole year) are Genesis 1:1–2:4a; Psalm 136:1–9, 23–26; Genesis 1:1–5, 11–18, 8:6–18, 9:8–13; Psalm 124:1–8; Genesis 22:1–18; Psalm 16; Exodus 14:10–31, 15:20–21; Exodus 15:1b–13, 17–18; Isaiah 55:1–11; Isaiah 12:2–6; Proverbs 8:1–8, 19–21, 30:4b–6 or Baruch 9:39–15, 32–4:4; Psalm 19; Ezekiel 36:24–28; Psalm 124:1–8 and Psalm 43; Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 143; Zephaniah 3:14–20; Psalm 98; Jonah 1:1–2:1; Jonah 2:2–9; Isaiah 61:1–4, 9–11; Deuteronomy 32:1–4, 7, 36a, 43a; Daniel 3:1–29; Song of the Three 35–65; Romans 6:3–11; John 20:1–18.

12 Resurrection of Our Lord

Easter Day

Today's texts are Acts 10:34–43 or Isaiah 25:6–9; Psalm 118:1–2, 4–24; 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 or Acts 10:34–43; Mark 16:1–8 or John 20:1–18. The lectionary really wants us to hear the story from Acts today;

why is that? Peter tells the crowd at Cornelius' house that God shows no partiality—that people don't have to be born into a certain race, place, family, religion, or way of life to be acceptable to God. The last verse is the important one: Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Everyone! You might read the whole story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–48) today for your devotions. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

12 Resurrection of Our Lord

Easter Evening

Notice that the disciples on the road to Emmaus don't realize who their companion is until he is seated at their table. What does that tell us about what Jesus thinks of hospitality? The texts appointed for this evening are Isaiah 25:6–9; Psalm 114, 1 Corinthians 5:6b–8; Luke 24:13–49.

19 Second Sunday of Easter

Easter isn't just one day; it's a season of 50 days! Why so long? We know that the number seven is a biblical symbol of perfection or completion; the Easter season is perfection times completion—plus one! Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! Today's appointed texts are Acts 4:32–35; Psalm 133; John 1:1–2:2; and John 20:19–31.

25 Mark, Evangelist

Who was Mark? As early as the

second century, people have identified him as Peter's interpreter or translator, who wrote his Gospel in Rome after Peter's martyrdom in the year 64; it is the earliest of the four Gospels in our Bible.

Tradition has it that Mark went to preach in Alexandria, Egypt, became that city's first bishop, and was martyred there. His reputed remains had some wild adventures over the centuries: In the year 832, merchants from Venice smuggled the bones out of Egypt, packing them in a basket under a layer of pickled pork and hams, and the Muslim border guards waved them through, holding their noses. The amazing Basilica of San Marco in Venice was built to house the relic. You might read the texts appointed for Mark's commemoration today: Isaiah 52:7–10; Psalm 57; 2 Timothy 4:6–11, 18; Mark 1:1–15.

26 Third Sunday of Easter

Today's texts are Acts 3:12–19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1–7; Luke 24:36b–48. Every year on the third Sunday of Easter, we hear a Gospel story of the risen Lord sharing food with his disciples. Today he greets the disciples, saying "Peace be with you," shares a morsel of food, and explains the meaning of his death and resurrection through the Scriptures. Where else do things like this happen every Sunday? The risen Lord is there too.



My 78-year-old mother, Ruth Youngdahl Nelson (pictured above), stood before a judge and pleaded guilty to breaking the law. She had stationed herself in a little boat in front of a Trident nuclear submarine, a vessel five football fields long with enough nuclear warheads to destroy entire countries. It was the late 1980s. My mother said she was following God's law. With her body, she said *no* to weapons of mass destruction and *yes* to life. In the months leading up to her act, she had written letters and spoken out, but finally felt compelled to join a group of protesters near the submarine.

At the courthouse, reporters asked why she, an American Mother of the Year (www.americanmothers.org),

had committed civil disobedience. Without a moment's hesitation, she replied, "I did it for the children of the world." Because of her travels, she personally knew people in countries the nuclear weapons were aimed at. She felt that she was called to take a stand for a better, more peaceful world.

Like Queen Esther and my mother, we sometimes find ourselves in situations that call for faithful disobedience. We remember the people who have dared to speak out, march, and sometimes defy courts for the cause of justice. We remember the mothers who stood at the mines, beating their baking pans with spoons to bring attention to the injustice of the miners' condi-

tions at the turn of the century. We remember the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, giving silent witness to the injustice of the disappeared who had been snatched from their midst during the years of military dictatorship in Argentina.

TAKING A STAND

For many of us, such dramatic action seems heroic, far away, and disconnected from our everyday lives. We are often unaware of the injustices around us. We live in sheltered communities and churches that racially, socially, and economically reflect us. Understanding and fighting injustice takes more than an occasional visit or Christmas basket. Understanding beyond our comfort zones takes repeated real exposure to the issues. As parents and grandparents, we should expose our children and grandchildren to the injustices of our society.

For example, the struggle of women coming out of prison and the counterproductive way our justice system works becomes real with a name and a story. Books like *Couldn't Keep It to Myself* by Wally Lamb move us to want to help change women's prison and post-prison situations. The reality of inadequate education on the future of inner-city youth becomes injustice when one knows a child and the dismal hopes for his future as described in Jonathan Kozol's books. The tough times

or women working minimum wage jobs as waitresses, nursing aides, and retail clerks, poignantly shared in Barbara Ehrenrich's book, *Nickel and Dimed*, makes one want to work for change.

TAKING RISKS

The list of justice issues is long, and yet we know so little of them. Relationships push us to stand alongside people left out and left behind, and sometimes, to take risky action. We have opportunities to bridge these gaps with partner churches by coming together around common causes, by becoming part of wider justice movements. We can make a difference. Silence and inaction are unacceptable; God calls us to be part of the action.

"Let justice roll down like waters," says the prophet Amos (Amos 5:24). Micah asks, "What does the LORD require of us but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8)."

I have been arrested several times, joining groups of Christians protesting governmental budget cuts or actions contrary to what is deemed God's justice for us all. But, sometimes the action is as small as speaking out when racist or demeaning things are said or done in our presence. We often become aware of injustices and the need for more radical disobedience in the midst of smaller steps of action.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Several years ago, the U.S. Congress was voting on a budget that would cut \$50 billion from foster care, college scholarships, Women Infants and Children (WIC), and such programs, while at the same time giving \$60 billion in tax cuts to the wealthiest 10 percent. Sojourners (www.sojournal.net) organized a demonstration. The night before the protest, we gathered in a church for prayer and stories of the budget's impact, and recommitted ourselves to non-violent civil disobedience the next day. Over 100 Christians sang and prayed on our knees in front of a Capitol building entrance; we were arrested one by one for "incommoding"—blocking a government entrance.

The Sojourners group included church leaders and other people of all ages and races from all over the United States. We had tried writing letters, visiting congressional offices, and seeking meetings with the president. Finally, we felt that only the act of prayerfully breaking the law at a Capitol entrance would dramatize the immorality of taking funds from the poor while giving tax cuts to the wealthy.

Our arrests got a lot of press and did have an effect on Congress. In addition, we experienced community as we acted together for justice. When we do civil disobedience, we must be prepared to take

responsibility for the consequences of our actions, even if it means jail or fines. We were held for a day, fined, and released.

TAKING ACTION

A lot of steps are needed before taking such action. First steps include learning about issues through personal exposure and reading and discussing them with a wide variety of people. The ELCA's advocacy office (www.elca.org/advocacy) provides a lot of information, as do groups such as Bread for the World (www.bread.org) and Sojourners. Part of this phase is to begin to understand people and points of view from another perspective and to broaden knowledge of the issues.

Sometimes our steps for justice may simply mean speaking up for another point of view, offering new information, telling a story that illustrates the injustice. Though we might disagree with someone about the issues, we must not explode or treat another with anything but love. South African Bishop Desmond Tutu shares his father's wisdom: "Son, don't raise your voice; sharpen your argument." We can understand other points of view and share our witness for justice in prayerful and loving ways.

Next, take action by e-mailing or visiting the offices of your state representatives, governor, congressional representatives, or president.

TAKING COURAGE

The current *Lutheran Woman Today* Bible study about Daniel, Ruth, and Esther has set the scene. Mordecai was a truth-teller for Queen Esther, helping her understand the gravity of the situation. We all need truth-tellers, people we respect and listen to. Once Esther understood the situation and what she needed to do, it took courage to take dangerous action. Her preparation included getting many people to fast and pray for guidance and wisdom. We need the prayer warriors, too.

A preacher friend uses a story from the Gospel of Mark to show the various gifts needed for action. In Mark 2:1–5, people brought a sick man to Jesus but were turned away because of the crowd. Finally, they cut a hole in the roof and lowered the stretcher down through the hole so Jesus could heal the sick man.

It took a team of people to make that happen: the thinkers whose idea overcame the obstacles, the investors who provided the resources for the stretcher and the cutting tools, the intercessors who prayed the effort through, and finally, the implementers who cut the hole in the roof and lowered the sick man for Jesus to heal. There are opportunities for each of us to use our gifts and talents for justice action.

Once Esther understood what God's justice compelled her to

do, she used her womanly smarts to move into action. She got all dressed up and perfumed and made her approach to the king. When the king received her, rather than blurt-ing out what she wanted, Esther invited him to dinner. Twice she did this, not in a hurry to make her request, using suspense and skill to set the scene.

Sometimes we, as women, might use our cooking skills, our smarts, our other non-confrontational ways to move toward justice. Sharing a meal together is a great starting point for getting to know others.

Most important, though, was Esther's courage and willingness to take a risk for the sake of her people. God gives us the courage we need when we feel God's call to work for justice.

TAKING THE CHALLENGE

We are living in challenging times: financial worries and insecurity, global warming, budget shortfalls, rising crime rates, and a high prison population. These have made us worry more about ourselves rather than care about the poor.

Many of us are like Esther—we live in better situations than most of the rest of the world and we forget. Our awareness of poverty, hunger, and injustice is dulled by our own concerns. Yet this is a time when Christians should work even harder for the common good. We can't do

it alone, but we can be voices for justice together.

Christian women have the tools, the heart, and the smarts to make this world a better place. When my mother, two years after her civil disobedience, got the word that she had invasive cancer and not much longer to live, she wrote these words:

"I love life, Lord, and if you should give me more time, I would want to be about your business. I want to challenge my beloved country to put its trust in you, not in weapons and war. I want to challenge people everywhere to be stewards of what you've given them . . . and for those of us who have been given so much to share our skills and resources and love with those who have so little. What a world that would be—the kind you meant it to be."

Can we, as God's people, move beyond our self-interest and private concerns to see that it is for such a time as this that we are called to be about the work of justice and community? Harry Emerson Fosdick's hymn is our prayer, "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 705). 🌿

Mary Nelson, a *Sojourners* board member, is president emeritus of Bethel New Life Christian Community Development Association in Chicago. Bethel New Life was started by Bethel Lutheran Church in the 1970s to fight poverty and hopelessness.



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From scripts to faith

by Martha E. Stortz

The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show aired on TV during the '60s when the Cold War heated up everyone's anxieties. The cartoon with its superheroes (a flying squirrel and a moose) and its villains (an Eastern European couple) both named our fears and made us laugh at them. It was a great grace. My favorite part of the show was the occasional feature "Fractured Fairy Tales."

"Once upon a time," the princess would begin telling the story. Then a courtier broke in: "No, wait, wasn't it twice?" Another piped up: "Really, it happened four times, don't you think?" The tales them-

selves were no less twisted. A hapless prince beckoned Rapunzel to let down her golden hair—but she'd gotten it cut short the day before. In another episode, the princess kissed a frog—but he turned into a horse, not a handsome prince. The princess shrugged, mounted the horse, turned to the audience and said: "Things never turn out like it says in the story." Then she galloped off into the sunset. "Fractured Fairy Tales" was great training for the adult world.

Nothing ever turns out as expected. I had written the script for my life when I was 20. It included

a husband, children, and writing—I hoped as a successful novelist or published poet. Now here I am in my mid 50s: no children, divorced, then widowed. At least I'm writing. Somehow, somewhere, I wandered off script, and then the sad wisdom hit me: "Things never turn out like it says in the story." The princess was right.

We all have scripts we've lost or thrown out, scripts that got cruelly yanked away from us: a child who died, a war that changed everything, a job that ended before we were ready, an economy that simply hit bottom. We've lost our scripts that

old us what would happen next, how everything would turn out.

Just as we have scripts for ourselves, we also have scripts for the people we love. “If she would just _____!” Fill in the blank with whatever you think this dear person should do or be. We know it’s a losing battle; all the same, we can’t help ourselves.

A dear friend spent her 20s studying to be the lawyer her parents thought she should be, and she grew thinner and sadder by the year. The practice of law made her leaner and meaner. She could see herself becoming a person she wouldn’t know—or want to know—in 20 years. By the time she was 30, she left law to teach grade school and started smiling again.

Hollywood lives by scripts, but disciples live by faith. There’s a huge difference. It’s the difference between leading and following, talking and listening, and between entitlement and gratitude.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *reading and following*

The movie credits tell us who the leading actors and actresses are. They lead the pack of supporting characters not only on the red carpet, but also in gossip columns, entertainment shows, and popular magazines. But discipleship, in contrast, is about following. The central command of discipleship is not “Lead on!” but “Follow me.”

Jesus repeats it over and over. It’s not a once-in-a-lifetime invitation. But he’s not a broken record either; disciples need reminding. We need to hear those words again and again along the way.

Jesus makes the invitation negatively in Mark’s Gospel, in a passage that is the hinge of the narrative. Jesus pauses in the midst of his ministry to take stock: Who does everyone think he really is? The disciples inform him that everyone thinks he must be Elijah or John the Baptist or one of the prophets, all promising that the “day of the Lord” is at hand. Then Jesus poses the same question to those who know him best: “Who do *you* say that I am?” Without hesitation, Peter answers, “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:29). In Jewish expectation, the Messiah was a military hero who would rise up out of the desert and use military might to free the people of Israel from Roman occupation. If Jesus is that promised hero, then Peter gets to be second in command.

But Jesus responds by talking about a Son of Man who will be rejected, suffer, be killed, and be resurrected. When Peter hears this, he protests. Peter thinks he’s found the true script of Christian discipleship—and this suffering business is not in it! This is not what he expected; somebody re-wrote the script. This is a reversal of fortune, definitely not the role Peter had imag-

ined for Jesus or, more importantly, for himself. And Jesus rebukes him: “Get behind me” (8:33).

The words sting, but Jesus is only telling Peter to follow. Followers keep behind the leader. Discipleship is like that. All we have to do to follow is keep Jesus in front of us.

A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *talking and listening*

Actors live by scripts, and they always know what they are going to say and what they are going to do, because it’s all written down. Disciples live by faith, which is a lot less certain. Where actors focus on what they are supposed to say next, disciples concentrate on listening.

In John’s Gospel, “Follow me” are among the first words out of Jesus’ mouth (John 1:43). These are also some of the last words he speaks. Jesus says these same words again and again to disciples across the centuries. To hear them, we have to listen. And we do that through prayer. More than a place of speaking and talking to God, prayer is a place of listening.

A friend described his life of prayer as a journey from talking to listening: “First, I talked *at* God, as one would talk at someone he’d just met. Then, I talked *to* God, as one would talk to a friend or colleague. Gradually, I found myself talking *with* God, waiting to speak as I weighed what the other person was

saying. Now, I find myself listening *to* God, without much new to say. And lately, I've been listening *for* God, waiting in silence for God to come." What is my friend listening for? He's listening for Jesus' gracious invitation: "Follow me."

My friend moved from script to faith. In the beginning my friend expected God to listen to him. But when he began to live by faith, not script, he understood that it was he who should listen to God.

A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *entitlement and gratitude*

Actors vie for the Oscars, visible reward for all that hard work. Disciples don't traffic in rewards. In a world of merit raises, sales commissions, and the perks of success, this seems hard to understand.

There's evidence that even the first disciples sought the red carpet before they learned better. For example, James and John nominated themselves for the Oscar for Best Disciple, and they pestered Jesus about the honor. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:37). Jesus put them in their place: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45). This was not the script the disciples thought they had signed up for. James and John had to learn to live by faith and serve rather than be served.

Unlike entitlement, gratitude is the heart's response to God's faithfulness. Gratitude turns in praise from the gift to the giver. When my nieces came to this country from Guatemala on Christmas Eve seven years ago, they knew only two words of English: "Thank you." They joined my husband's family for the annual Christmas celebration the next day. As the party wore on, they were overwhelmed. It was too much, especially the gifts. They had lots of opportunity to practice their English. "*Thank you.*" "*Thank you.*" "*Thank you,*" they said over and over again. But as the wrapping paper mounted around them, they turned in wonder from the gifts to the givers: "Thank *you.*" "Thank *you.*" "Thank *you.*"

Gratitude makes the same turn when we discover God's presence in our darkest nights. No matter how far we've wandered or been wrenched away from where we thought we were going, God is there, the grace we can count on.

LIVING BY FAITH, NOT SCRIPT

"The righteous live by their faith," the prophet Habakkuk observed. The words impressed a young Martin Luther deeply, and he made them the centerpiece of his Reformation theology. Yet generations of Lutherans have turned faith into a work, as if by grunting and greater effort, we could have more of it.

A friend went through a particularly hard time, managing hardship with grace and composure. Someone at coffee hour complimented her loud and long on her display of "great faith." She told me later the compliment unsettled her. She hadn't sought out the Oscar for Best Disciple; she didn't want it; she didn't feel she was in any way entitled. "I was just doing the next thing that had to be done," she said. "I had a lot of help along the way."

I told her I'd seen a lot of people in similar situations lose their faith. Her tragedy seemed to have strengthened hers. She replied: "I honestly don't know why I didn't fall apart; I felt like it, believe me. I don't know why I didn't lose my faith. I didn't expect God to fix anything and make it all better. But I didn't realize God could be so close. I knew I wasn't in free fall."

My friend lived by faith, and in doing so, received far more than she expected. Her words capture the import of Luther's Reformation insight. As a young monk, Luther wanted to be the best monk around, and he worked to be faithful. Then with sudden clarity, he realized that the faithfulness at stake was not the disciple's—but God's. And God's faithfulness is boundless. On that, we can always count. 🌿

Martha E. Stortz is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary.

Here I am; send me



Christiana Metzger,
a member of Amazing
Grace Lutheran Church in
Baltimore, Md., is a two-year
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As an ELCA missionary, Christiana Metzger serves the Diakonia AIDS Ministry, a program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa—Central Diocese. Christiana says she is "challenged and blessed daily" by her important work, which includes providing education and training sessions for program coordinators, organizing programs for orphaned and other vulnerable children, and helping to lead support groups for people living with HIV and AIDS.

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HEALTH WISE

At Risk for Colon Cancer?

by Molly M. Ginty

When Jill Jensen put off her colon cancer screening, it nearly cost her life.

"As a nurse and health clinic administrator, I knew full well that I should get routine testing at age 50," says Jensen, of Madison, Wisconsin. "But I got caught up in family and work commitments and waited until I was 54—only to discover I had colon cancer that had progressed to stage three of four possible stages."

If Jensen had been screened and treated earlier, she would not have had to endure abdominal surgery, chemotherapy that thinned her hair, radiation treatment that made her skin erupt in rashes, and fatigue and nausea that kept her out of work two days a week during her six-month treatment.

Jensen's case illustrates what can happen to the 50 percent of Americans who don't get colon cancer screening when they should.

"Routine testing is crucial—especially because it doubles as a preventative measure," says Dr. Durado Brooks of the American Cancer Society. "During colon cancer screening or colonoscopy, doctors can find and remove precancerous growths called polyps, preventing them from growing into cancer."

Cancerous polyps can develop at any point along the four- to five-foot colon (which absorbs nutrients and stores waste matter) or the six-inch rectum below it. That's why you must take measures to protect yourself from colon cancer, which appears in 154,000 new cases and claims 52,000 lives in the United States

each year. During April or national Cancer Control Month, here's how.

Keep Yourself Healthy

Diets high in fat, calories, and red and processed meats boost colon cancer risk, while diets rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains (and healthy levels of vitamin B-6, calcium, folic acid, and magnesium) lower it. Obesity and having a sedentary lifestyle are associated with colon cancer, so watch your weight and get the 30 minutes of daily exercise that health authorities recommend. Avoid smoking and having more than one alcoholic drink per day, which also boost your risk. And know that having type 2 diabetes (often associated with an unhealthy diet) makes you 30 percent more likely to develop colon cancer.

Watch for Warning Signs

Colon cancer is often accompanied by blood in the stool, which can be a symptom of less serious conditions such as hemorrhoids or anal fissures, but which you should nevertheless discuss with your doctor. Also make sure you talk about persistent diarrhea, constipation, abdominal discomfort, weakness, fatigue, or unexplained weight loss.

Get Screened

Ninety percent of colon cancers are diagnosed in people over age 50, which is why screening should start at that age and continue once every 10 years if results are normal. A strong laxative and 24-hour liquid diet are necessary before

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.

colonoscopy. And scopes are inserted in the rectum during the actual procedure. Many people are intimidated or frightened by the idea of colonoscopy," says Brooks. "But the exam is done under so much sedation that you likely won't remember it clearly. Surveys show most people who have had a colonoscopy say it wasn't nearly as bad as they expected, and they would have no problem going back and doing it again."

Consider Other Tests

If you're extremely squeamish about colonoscopy, know that a 2008 New England Journal of Medicine study found that "virtual" colonoscopy (CT colonography, which takes an X-ray of the abdomen instead of using a probe) is 90 percent as effective as regular colonoscopy at detecting cancerous polyps. Other screening tests include flexible sigmoidoscopy (which uses a smaller tube than colonoscopy); the barium enema (which uses pumped air, barium, and an X-ray) and stool tests (which look for signs of cancer in bowel movements). CT colonography, sigmoidoscopy, or a barium enema may be performed in lieu of colonoscopy once every five years. Stool tests may be performed annually, but aren't a substitute for other screenings because they don't check for polyps.

Know Your Family History

If you're African American, your risk of getting colorectal cancer is 12 percent higher than that of the general popula-

tion. People of Eastern European Jewish descent sometimes carry a genetic mutation that makes them more susceptible. And if you have an immediate relative with colon cancer, your risk is doubled. "In these cases, screening needs to start early, by age 45 at the latest," says Carlea Bauman, president of the Colorectal Cancer Coalition.

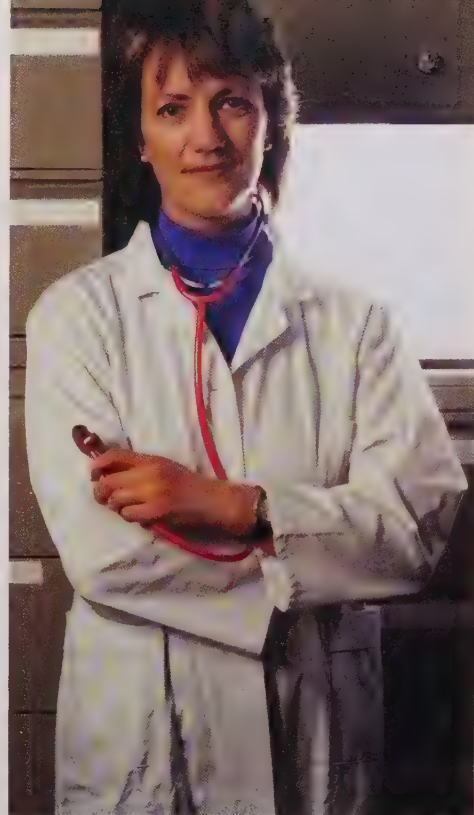
Don't Delay

As Jill Jensen's case illustrates, putting off colon cancer screening can lead to serious trouble.

"My tumor was just centimeters away from necessitating colostomy, in which a part of the colon is removed and surgeons create an opening in the abdomen and insert a special waste-collection bag that hangs outside your body," she says. "My cancer scare frightened me so much that I'm not only encouraging everyone I know to get colonoscopies, but driving them to their appointments and back."

Colon cancer is one of the slowest-growing cancers. And only 1 percent of polyps become cancerous. But because so few people get screening when they need it, only 39 percent of cases are detected early—the reason this disease is the second-leading cause of cancer death in the nation, and the reason you can't afford to wait. 🌿

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.




For more information

C3: The Colorectal Cancer Coalition
www.fightcolorectalcancer.org

Colon Cancer Alliance.org
www.ccalliance.org

American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org



GOD'S



For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

(Jeremiah 29:11)

Do you remember the board game “Clue”? You had to whittle away at the evidence until you discovered who committed the crime, in what room, and with which weapon.

Sometimes God’s purpose for our lives seems like such a mystery.

The verse from Jeremiah offers wonderful promise. We are not left to puzzle out our purpose alone; God has a plan for us. But is God’s plan really like the board game? Can we solve the mystery of God’s plan for our lives by discarding and

keeping clues? Is there one specific answer to the path we should take?

It depends. Maybe yes. Maybe no. When we are faced with a choice, perhaps God does not mind which path we select. Given that God created us in God’s image, gave us dominion over the creatures of the earth, and created companions for us in this earthly life, we can conclude that *this* is God’s plan for us and the details are not essential. Perhaps God has multiple



plans” for us . . . multiple ways we can live faithfully in relationship with God and with neighbors. God entrusts this kind of plan to our own discernment and decision. God is never finished with us, so to discover your own future promises from God, I invite you to listen in some stories I heard as a spiritual director at an ELCA seminary. Look beyond the details and find the dynamics that might help you discern what God wants of you.

The essence of the stories is true, though names and some information have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Do not be afraid

Spiritual direction is an ancient practice that has returned to use in past decades. It is an intentional conversation either between two individuals or among a group, led by a person who is trained to listen for the movements of the Holy

Spirit, and thereby God’s activity, in the life of the ones sharing their stories. Sometimes the conversations include big decisions, sometimes problems, sometimes joys. Always the conversations include the question, “Where do you see, feel, or experience God in the midst of your life and this story?”

Kelly, one woman I had such conversations with, was middle-aged. She had worked on a congregational staff for years, but lately

had become restless. She felt she was just going through the motions. People around her encouraged her to go to seminary, and so she did. She started taking classes and was thrilled with them. But she was still restless. As we explored the restlessness and uneasiness in her life, we gradually discovered she felt she was called to be a pastor, but could not see or imagine it. Truth told, she was afraid of the thought, and so ignored it. Over several conversations, she began to understand how she was making decisions based on fear.

The awareness did not remove the fears, but her honesty opened new ways to pray. We read, imagined, and prayed the biblical stories in which God sent angels with a message: “Be not afraid, God is with you.” As Kelly, who is now an ordained pastor, realized that she could trust this promise, she found the courage to open herself to possibilities beyond her fears.

Healing and freedom

Terri was not so sure about this spiritual direction stuff. She could make a joke of anything and kept her distance from questions I asked that got near her heart. I wondered why she made appointments at all, but she kept coming back. As trust grew between us, she shared her story. She had faith in God, but she had little trust in people.

As Terri’s story emerged, she

shared a painful story of childhood abuse, including the threat to stay quiet about it. From her more recent history, she recounted another awful event—seduction and rape by a trusted leader. This abuse also included the threat to tell no one. She was so bound in fear and shame that it was clear why she had trouble relating her experiences. In our conversations, we continued to explore, “Where is God in this?”

One day we read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. As she imagined herself bound up like Lazarus, in a shroud of shame, fear, and anger, she had to make a decision. Is this how she wanted to live the rest of her life? Just what were God’s plans for her?

Eventually she found a therapist and opened up the painful stories of her past. Over time she did the hard work of confronting the pain, shame, fear, and anger. She broke her silence and spoke to the authorities so that the leader would be removed from his position. Terri learned that God’s plan for her life included healing and freedom from the pain of the past. She now serves as an ELCA pastor, free to live a healthy and full life in the present.

Peace at the center

Averi delighted in her work. The daily tasks, conversations, and meetings contributed to her institution’s mission of caring for people

in crisis. She knew, understood, and trusted that God was always at work in her life. Averi also enjoyed our sessions in spiritual direction. She has come to her appointments for years, eager for the questions I ask her as I listen to her stories.

For Averi, who had found the work she loved, discerning God’s plan for her life meant trusting the Holy Spirit to lead and guide her daily. Through our work together, she began to understand that she must recognize God’s clues to be open to, listen to, and willing to trust the Holy Spirit.

Two important clues from God for Averi were lack of peace—unsettled feelings deep in her gut—and regret. When she felt tied up in knots, she knew she was off track. In her youth, Sunday after Sunday her pastor had concluded the sermon with, “Now may the peace of God that passes human understanding, keep your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus our Lord.” She liked the sound of those words. Better yet, she came to understand that peace at the center was a clue in discerning God’s plan for her. Peace at the center of her being allowed her to live with ambiguity and to be okay when she did not know the next steps.

Over time, Averi realized that feelings of regret also proved a valuable clue for discerning God’s will. She often asked herself, “Would

regret this if I don't do it?" She was disappointed in herself when she knew she should speak or act, but didn't. The regret at such times washed over her and caused uneasiness in her gut.

Then Averi shared a story about her work. Amid a difficult financial time, with a cost-cutting restructuring in the works, she realized that those who would be most hurt by the changes were among the lowest paid. As she told this story, she became unsettled and aggravated. It was as if energy was lifting her out of her chair. When asked, "What is God up to in your life right now?" she seemed to be stymied by the question.

She described how the situation was unfair, but she didn't know what she could do about it because she was not in a position of power.

Just such a time as this

We have learned that part of discernment is to pay attention to the Bible stories that come to mind while listening to others speak. As I heard Averi's distress, I recalled the story of Queen Esther. Together, we read the verses where Esther, with her cousin Mordecai's help, saw the injustice of the king's decree against the Jewish people. Esther's people needed help, and she was married to the only man who could change the situation, the king himself.

For Averi, Mordecai's words connected deeply, "For if you keep silence at such a time as this . . . relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such just such a time as this" (Esther 4:13b-14).

Averi felt no peace when she thought about the business decisions being made at her workplace. People already struggling to get by on their wages would be hit

**Perhaps you have come to royal dignity
for such just such a time as this.**

(Esther 4:13b-14)

hardest. Thinking of Esther's story, Averi knew that she would regret it if she did not act. It would be frightening to speak up. It might even jeopardize her own position.

Averi left our session that day knowing she needed to pray, listen, and be open to what the Holy Spirit would guide her to do or say, and she would not let fear dictate her decision. She was confident that the Spirit would help her recognize the next clues.

What's next?

I write this article not knowing Averi's next steps. Discerning God's plan in our lives is about seeking to see more clearly, not knowing

the end results. We long to know the end of the story—know the details—so we can plan and control our day-to-day life. But God's ways are different. God's timing, grace, mercy, and creativity are beyond our comprehension and planning. God's love frees us to care about others as Jesus cares, to be generous as God is generous, and to live creatively as the Holy Spirit creates life and community among us.

How can we know God's plan for us with certainty? If we truly seek God's plan—and not our best-intentioned version of what we think it is—we will recognize God's clues. We should look to peace or the absence of it. Both are guides. Then we will have courage to act for the well-being of others when we know we should.

All we can truly know for certain is that God loves us. In all the rest, we must discern. In open conversation with others and in quiet listening to God, the Holy Spirit will let us know God's plan for us. And we must always remember God's promise, "I am with you." 🌿

The Rev. Ginger Anderson-Larson has served the church most recently as director of spiritual formation at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. She and her husband, the Rev. Keith Larson, reside in Lost Nation, Iowa, where he is pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Lost Nation and St. Mark's in Oxford Junction.



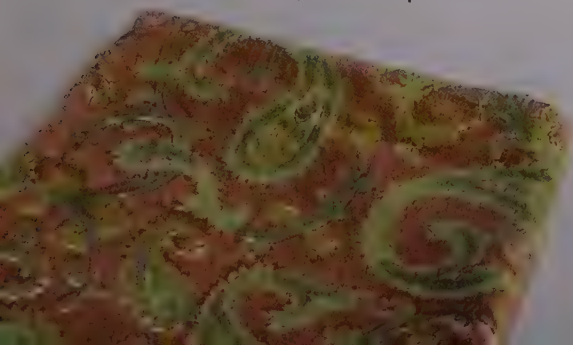
Applecart Lessons

by Phyllis Kersten

The following is a true story, and possibly a kind of parable as well.

The women's organization at Grace Lutheran, River Forest, Illinois, has a proud and illustrious history that goes back more than a century. In its earliest years, it was called the Women's Society and was known for hosting elegant receptions (with tea and coffee poured from a beautiful silver tea service) and exquisite luncheons.

The organization's major activity from its beginning, however, was a gigantic fall sale each November. Committees formed almost a year in advance—to pick the overall theme, work on decorations, design the table settings, and field-test recipes. Small groups of women met in homes all year long sewing craft items.



The sale included a bakery booth, a meat and cheese counter, Christmas ornament area, and crafts center that included needlework, quilts, and hand-made birdhouses and wooden toys. There was a large “attic treasures” area, a children’s corner with items under a dollar, and a best-selling books area. The proceeds each year was more than \$20,000, all given away to benefit selected local, national, and overseas church-related charities.

Times changed, of course, and the women’s organization changed with it. Grace Women’s Society became the Women of Grace—to broaden its appeal as an organization open to all women in the parish, especially to the growing number of women working outside the home. The organization’s annual activities and its many ministries—meal delivery for the ill and homebound, funeral luncheons, Bible studies—continued on full speed.

There came a time, however, when the leadership of Women of Grace could no longer do it all. Age, illness, caregiving responsibilities, and death diminished their ranks. And with that diminishment also came a palpable fear: Given all the economic changes, with more women now working than staying at home, would there be enough women with the energy to continue the Women of Grace traditions? And would these younger women

care enough to put these events on with the flair that Grace church and its community had come to expect? Could the torch be passed to the younger generation?

Tempest in a flower pot

There was a group of women in their 30s and 40s—some new members of Grace, some members for many years—who had both talent and interest in food and event planning and preparation. These women picked up the torch and volunteered to plan the next event: the fall luncheon. They had a creative idea—to serve the chicken salad entrée in lined flower pots. Decorated with ribbons and a flower, the pots looked like upside-down spring bonnets.

The salad was both tasty and pleasing to the eye. No one denied that. And the flower pots did make for a colorful, charming table. But some of the older women—ones who had not offered to step up into the leadership void themselves—were merciless in their criticism of the younger women who put on the luncheon. “Chicken salad served not on a plate, but in a flower pot? Whoever heard of such a thing?” The critics were brutal in their disdain, and the committee members were deeply hurt.

Having been burned by the criticism they received, these younger women were no longer eager to

take up the torch being passed. It’s not surprising. Younger members were reluctant to take up the mantle of leadership.

What God will do in Jesus

Right from the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, in Mary’s Magnificat, is the theme of what God will accomplish in Jesus’ incarnation: turn the world (if not a luncheon) upside down. In Spirit-inspired words, Mary speaks, of this “applecart upset” as if has already happened:

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

The Gospel, at its essence, is the story of Jesus becoming like us, taking on our human nature, so that by his death and resurrection (the ultimate applecart upset) we might become like him.

Sent out by God as Jesus himself was, those first disciples in the early church turned the world upside down, historians of that era tell us. How did they do that? By the love they showed one another, we’re told. By the way they welcomed one another, and, especially, by the way they welcomed Gentiles and others who were different than themselves. That welcome and inclusion are still how Christians turn the world upside down today.

Memories vs. nostalgia

Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister, in her book *The Gift of Years: Growing Old Gracefully*, writes of one of the paradoxes of old age: "That it means at the same time 'letting go' of some of what we've accumulated, as well as coming 'alive in ways [we] have never been alive before.'"

Chittister also describes the danger of blurring the distinction between memories and nostalgia. "Good memories," she says, "make us laugh on gray days and bring us old warmth on cold nights. . . . They enable us to have faith in the future because they remind us that the past has been so life-giving, so full of hope in all the tomorrows of life" (p. 175).

But, Chittister says, "Nostalgia is something different entirely. Nostalgia is not simply recollection of the past. Nostalgia is immersion in the past. Nostalgia traps us. . . . But the melancholy of nostalgia is *not* the geography of old age. Possibility is."

Chittister continues, "Nostalgia is pining and yearning and longing for what was good for us in the past, but which would be totally out of kilter with the here and now."

And finally she writes that, "memories are not the shackles of the aging. . . . They are the watermarks of our growth, the invitation to claim the joys of the past and the call to seek out those same things again, in different form, perhaps, but

as promise of the same kind of joy here and now."

What would it take for the Women of Grace to break out of the trap of nostalgia that had immobilized the organization? What would it take for them "to claim the joys of the past and the call to seek out those same things again," but "in different form, perhaps"?

Kick up your heels

What it took for the Women of Grace was for the older leadership to receive the gifts and ideas offered by the younger members for what they truly were: gifts from God, even though these ideas might threaten to turn some of their established world upside down.

Specifically what it took at Grace was for one—just one, Nancy—of the older leaders to meet with a group of younger women. She met with them and assured those who had been hurt that they didn't need to "become just like us in order to belong." She met with them and listened, listened to their ideas for involving more women and for helping the organization let go of some of what it had accumulated over the years, as well as come "alive in ways [we had] never been alive before."

Out of these informal gatherings came a suggestion for a new name for the organization to appeal to younger members, Women@

Grace. And then, Nancy became an advocate for the younger women with her contemporaries.

Out of this process came a new beginning for the women's organization at Grace. Over 100 women attended a fall kick-off event entitled "Kick Up Your Heels." The price of entry was a pair of gently used shoes, to be given to homeless women in a job training program so that they could wear a nice pair of shoes to their job interviews. The Grace women broke up into small groups to brainstorm ideas for the future of Women@Grace, and to sign up for ways in which they wanted to use their talents.

Women@Grace

After a one-year sabbatical, the annual fall sale returned. Its theme this year was "Paths of Peace." Three younger women served as co-chairs, but there was a good mix of young and old making it happen. There have been a few new wrinkles added to the sale every year (just as most of us have seen our share of new wrinkles annually, as well). Included have been Third World handicrafts, a used book area, a Friday and Sunday schedule (rather than the original Thursday to Friday format), with brunch on Sunday morning. Fair-trade coffee and chocolate are on sale, as they are on Sunday mornings monthly through the year. The proceeds still

support ministries to women and children at home and abroad.

On other fronts, the children and grandchildren of those who had started the annual Christmas dinner for the Chicago Uptown Ministry (an inner-city program in Chicago) along with a cadre of other regular volunteers, keep it going. That ministry's clients are also the honored guests at the Women@Grace December luncheon.

A new monthly Saturday morning Bible study for the moms of infants and toddlers has been added to the array of established Bible study circles. A number of the elder members of Women@Grace, together with their husbands, were among the first to volunteer for one of the five mission trips the congregation has taken to New Orleans and Mississippi for Hurricane Katrina relief. The Tuesday night mothers' group chose their own way to help: getting the names of single moms and the ages of their kids at Grace's partner congregation in Long Beach, Mississippi, to buy and ship items on their wish list for Christmas. Another year, this group sent gift cards.

To recognize Jesus

I think I know what motivated Nancy to gather those potential younger leaders together. I think she remembered the story in Luke of the widow's mite and the story of

the generations of women at Grace who had given all that they had. Yes, and I think she remembered the story of the bent-over woman, who was healed so that she could stand and serve again.

But especially, I believe, Nancy remembered Mary's Magnificat and the parable of the woman who turned her house upside down to find one lost coin. The woman had nine coins, but like God, she couldn't rest, she couldn't be satisfied, until all 10 were united. Every coin is important and valued in God's economy. There's no joy in heaven (or on earth either) until the 10 coins, the 100 sheep, the elder and younger sons—and the elder and younger daughters—are home together again. That's what Jesus turned the world upside down to accomplish, that completion.

Perhaps Nancy also remembered one other story from Luke's

Gospel: the story in Luke 24 of how the two disciples from Emmaus, in their sorrow, needed a stranger to walk with them, a stranger who became known to them only in the breaking of the bread. (See Luke 24:13–35.)

Early on, Luke says, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16). We, too, often don't recognize Jesus when he comes to us, walks with us, in the guise of a newcomer, a stranger. But that stranger is Jesus, and he comes frequently to play applecart upset with our lives—to help us come alive in ways we have never been alive before. 🌸

The Rev. Phyllis Kersten retired last May following 12 years as Grace's associate pastor. She was co-author of *LWT's* 1990 Bible study, “Companions on Your Journey: Studies of Biblical Women,” and has been an adjunct instructor at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

For Reflection

- Has there ever been a time when your women's group was immobilized by nostalgia? Or a time when newcomers might have felt that they “had to become just like us, in order to belong”?
- How are things now? Are the gifts of younger women in your church welcomed and received? If so, how did that come about?
- In the words of Joan Chittister, how has your local women's group let go of some of what you've accumulated, and come “alive in ways [you've] never been alive before”?
- In what ways, personally or as a group, have your memories not been shackles, but “the watermarks of . . . growth, the invitation to claim the joys of the past and the call to seek out those same things again, in different form, perhaps, but as promise of the same kind of joy here and now” (Chittister)?

Lefse, Rommegrot, Rosettes

by Terri Lackey



Photo: Corey Vilhauer

At \$3,280, attic treasures (a.k.a. other's people's junk) bring in a good chunk of change during the annual bazaar at First Lutheran Church, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. But it is the food, especially the Scandinavian buffet (the *Kaffee Stua*) and the *Food Buttik*, that rakes in the big *krona*, more than \$11,000 in 2008.

Grub rarely heard of in this writer's native South—lefse, rolla polsa, rommegrot, rosettes—creates satisfied stomachs and some small spats. The bazaar's drawing card is the lefse (for those who live south of the Mason-Dixon line, that's a Norwegian flatbread made of potatoes, cream, and flour with perhaps a sprinkle of sugar and cinnamon). "A line a block long forms early in the morning for our

lefse," said Janet Naessig, co-chair of the event's publicity. "When we opened to let the people in, our senior pastor was standing in the door. A little old lady elbowed him in the back and shouted, 'Get out of the way!' He did."

Held the first Saturday in November for several decades, the bazaar keeps the women of First Lutheran busy most of the year, Naessig said. Fourteen Women of the ELCA groups and other volunteers (including lots of husbands and young people) oversee sales of linens, quilts, used books, wood crafts, children's toys, fair-trade coffee, Christmas decorations, and much more.

Money raised (in 2008, more than \$47,000) goes to good

causes—missions and ministries of the church in the community and the world.

Naessig, who works long and hard during the weekend sale, has only one complaint. "I never get to go shopping." 🌸

Terri Lackey is managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.

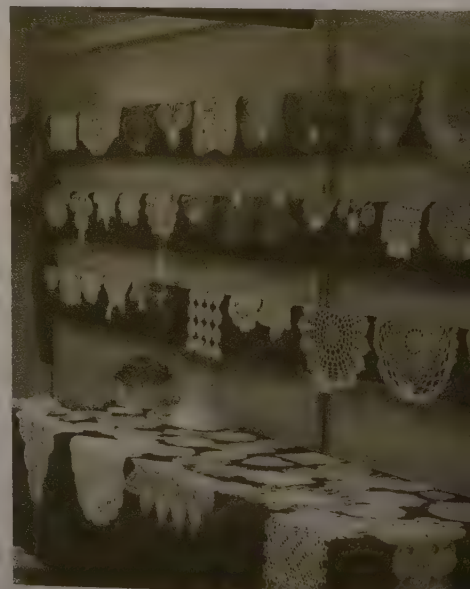


Photo: Toby Wellenstein



T US PRAY

Leaving Normal

Debra K. Farrington

The phone call was a total surprise. “I’ve decided to leave my job,” a friend told me, “and go into business for myself.” The position she was leaving was a coveted one, with high pay and prestige to spare. Going off to start her own company was risky and plenty of people thought she was crazy. But my friend felt called in other directions.

After much soul searching, my friend decided to do what I call “leaving normal.” Despite having what looked like the perfect job and life, my friend didn’t feel her true gifts were fully engaged. It was time for her to move closer to what she sensed God was asking of her.

Sometimes God does ask for dramatic changes in life. The story of Esther, examined in this issue, is one such story. God asked Esther to risk her very life to help her people. But not all divine calls involve such high drama.

Think of Lydia in Acts. Upon hearing the Apostle Paul, she was converted and her household was baptized. Her outward life changed little, from what we know, but the focus of her life changed completely. The scary part about living a faithful life, however, is that we can’t know what God will ask of us. The best we can do is to listen for God’s hopes and dreams and respond at whatever level we can.

In my own experience, while God hopes we’ll say *yes* to a sense of call, God is willing to take *no* for an answer. As Mordecai tells Esther as she faces God’s call to help her people: “[I]f you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and

deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter.” There are times in our lives when we’re simply not ready to say “yes,” or when moving forward must be postponed for good reasons. God’s hopes and plans for the world do not rest entirely on our shoulders alone.

But if God really wants us to move in a given direction, God will keep asking. In fact that’s one of the most reliable signs of a true call. It has a way of coming up over and over. It’s worth paying attention when that happens.

If I had my choice, I’d take a call like Lydia’s. It isn’t that her call wasn’t important, but she didn’t have to give up her business and community life to fulfill it. Some of what God asks of us, however, will be scarier than that. Perhaps the best preparation we can make for whatever may lie ahead is to pray with St. Patrick:

May the strength of God pilot us,
may the power of God preserve us,
may the wisdom of God instruct us,
may the hand of God protect us,
may the way of God direct us,
may the shield of God defend us,
may the host of God guard us
against the snares of evil
and the temptations of the world.

Oh, in case you’re wondering about my friend, she loves her new work and her company is thriving. 🌸

Debra K. Farrington is a retreat leader and has written eight books of Christian spirituality. Her Web site is www.debrafarrington.com.



Esther: For Such a Time as This

by Gwen Sayler and Ann Fritschel

BIBLE STUDY

Theme Verse

Esther 4:14

“For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Opening

Hymn “God of Grace and God of Glory” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 705 or *Lutheran Book of Worship* 415)

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
we live as your Easter people.
Grant us the wisdom and courage
to boldly proclaim in word and deed
your coming reign of justice and peace.
Bring your healing presence and power
to our world in need.
In your name we pray. Amen.

Overview

In the last session, King Ahasuerus selected a young Jewish woman, Esther, as the new queen. Her cousin Mordecai caused trouble when he refused to bow

down to the King’s vizier Haman. Haman retaliated by persuading the king to allow him to destroy “a certain people” in the empire.

Now we see the results of this plotting. Mordecai will persuade Esther through her *hesed*—her loving, extravagant loyalty—to take the heroic action of risking her life to petition the king to save her people. Haman plots to kill Mordecai, but in a series of coincidences and reversals, ends up parading Mordecai with royal honors. Yet, is it merely coincidence and ironic reversal? Or is God working in hidden ways?

Setting the Stage

READ ESTHER 4:1–8. Chapter 4 is central to the book of Esther. Haman’s earlier edict to “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews” (3:13) has been sent throughout the empire. The edict will not take effect for 11 months, giving the Jews plenty of time to grieve and their enemies plenty of time to prepare. The reactions to the edict are intense and immediate.

1. List the actions of Mordecai and the Jewish community when they hear of the edict. List Esther’s actions during this time as well. Compare and contrast Mordecai’s and Esther’s actions.

Mordecai’s and the Jewish community’s actions cover almost the entire range of expressions of mourning known in ancient Israel—tearing one’s clothes, fasting

weeping, lamenting, sackcloth and ashes. All these actions can be both expressions of intense grief and eloquent pleas to God for deliverance.

But the lack of reference to God makes their actions ambiguous. Are they only expressing their despair, or are they reaching out to God for deliverance?

Esther seems remote from all this grief. Since she is secluded in the harem, she may not even be aware of the edict. When she is told that Mordecai is in front of the royal gate in sackcloth and ashes, she first tries to send him clothes, since protocol does not allow a person in sackcloth to enter the king's gate. Is Esther concerned about appearances? She then sends her eunuch, Hathach (*HAY-thack*) to find out what has happened.

Unlike Esther, Mordecai understands the situation completely; he even knows about Haman's bribe of the king. (We assume that the bribe is not common knowledge.) Mordecai asks Hathach to tell Esther to go to the king, making supplication to the king "for her people." Mordecai is reminding Esther of her solidarity with the Jewish people. She is more than a Persian queen and must act with *hesed* to her own people.

Mordecai's Challenge

READ ESTHER 4:9–13. One of the most important conversations in the book of Esther takes place through an intermediary, the eunuch Hathach. Esther begins by reminding Mordecai that anyone who comes into the king's presence uninvited may be put to death. Only those to whom the king holds out the golden scepter may live.

Since the king has not asked for her for a month, she feels that the king may not receive her. Esther is reluctant to act to help her people.

2. Why do you think Esther is reluctant to help her people? What do you think she was feeling when Mordecai made this request?

Esther is not the first biblical person to refuse such a request. Both Moses and Jeremiah were reluctant prophets. Moses said that he had a speech impediment and Jeremiah said that he was too young. They may have been afraid as well. Moses knew that he would be challenging Pharaoh's power. Jeremiah knew that being a prophet was dangerous; indeed, Jeremiah's own family plotted to kill him. These two men received their call directly from God, while Esther is only hearing from her cousin. We should not judge Esther too harshly for not leaping to risk her life immediately.

Mordecai's response, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews" (4:13b), works on two levels. Tucked away in the palace, it might be easy for Esther to think of herself as the Persian queen. She may think that she is "passing" as Persian. Apparently, the only people in the palace who know that she is a Jew are her maids and eunuchs, and she has won their loyalty. She may feel that her secret is safe with them. But Mordecai gives her a realistic evaluation of the situation: If it is discovered that Esther is a Jew, she too will be subject to the edict. She too will die.

Second, Mordecai reminds her of her Jewishness and that she should have *hesed* to her people. How will she feel when she looks out from the safety of the palace and sees her own people slaughtered?

Philosopher Edmund Burke once said, "All that is necessary for evil to succeed is for good [people] to do nothing." Martin Niemoeller, a Lutheran pastor in Nazi Germany, reflecting upon those times, wrote:

When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.
When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.
When they came for the trade unionists,
I remained silent;

I was not a trade unionist.
When they came for me,
There was no one left to speak.

While Mordecai asks Esther to identify with and act on *besed* for her own people, as Christians we understand that we belong to and with *all* people, since God loves *all* people and Jesus died for *all* people.

We are to act with *besed*, loving loyalty, to *all* people, not just those related to us. Moreover, we are called to do so as heroes. As we saw in the book of Daniel, sometimes we act as heroes in the small everyday actions of life.

3. *What can prevent us from speaking out on behalf of others? Can we remain safe and uninvolved when we see injustice done to others? As Christians, what does God call us to do about injustice?*

Digging Deeper

The Bible makes it clear that God is a God of justice and calls God's people to do justice. (See Amos 5:24; Micah 6:6–8; Matthew 25:31–46.) Justice in the Hebrew Bible is about relationships, and about restoring wholeness and harmony so that relationships may continue. Justice means working to bring God's peace and wholeness to the world. Both Testaments command God's people to move beyond justice to love (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43–48). While our calling to do justice is clear, exactly what justice looks like in any particular situation may be unclear.

For example, we know that we are to fight racism, sexism, and ageism, to work for peace, to feed the hungry, and to clothe the naked. Yet the Bible does not give us specific programs for addressing injustice, and Christians will disagree about how to carry on the work of justice. God's people need wisdom for discernment in specific solutions. (See "For Such a Time as This," p. 12.)

4. *We often think of working for justice in grand, large actions such as the civil rights movement or national boycotts of certain products. What are some things individuals can do to work for justice? What are some things congregations can do?*

Mordecai has told Esther that she must not remain silent, but is to go before the king. This may not seem like a big thing, but it could cost Esther her life.

Mordecai's Central Claim

Mordecai continues, "For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14). In this persuasive statement, Mordecai makes two claims.

The first claim is that the Jews will find relief and deliverance. Mordecai is sure that his people will be saved. This deliverance will come from another quarter or place. Where? Who? The text is ambiguous. The inspired writer could have stated clearly that God will deliver the people, but didn't. By the first centuries after Jesus, long after this book was written down, the word translated as *quarter* or *place* here had taken on another meaning. When used with the definite article, "the place" became a way for pious Jews (who do not name God) to talk about God. But this text was written before that usage became common; it is unclear that this meaning is intended. Deliverance will come for the Jews of Persia, but we don't know how.

Mordecai's second claim is that perhaps it is not just a coincidence that Esther is queen at this time. Perhaps this is the meaning and purpose of her life. She is queen so she can save her people. Mordecai does not expect God to directly intervene or send an angel, as God did in the book of Daniel. What seem to be coincidences may be signs of God at work, but even those

incidences will not mean a thing if humans beings do not act. Mordecai cannot be sure that God is going to change things, so Esther must act as if it is up to her.

- 5.** *We believe that our lives are not purposeless or meaningless, but that God has a plan for our lives. How do you determine and know God's will for your life? If you wish, share with the person on your left an example of God's will for your life.*

is not always clear what God's purpose is for our lives. It can be hard to live with such uncertainty, yet we are not able to escape it. (See "God's Clues," p. 22.)

This text contains a lot of ambiguity. Who will save the people? Why is God not mentioned? Is this truly God's will for Esther? This ambiguity must be deliberate, for the inspired writer could have at least mentioned God at several places in the book of Esther, yet chose not to do so. Why might this be?

There are at least two reasons. One is to keep us open to the possibility of God's hidden actions in our world. We rarely see God work in grand miraculous ways. If we look for God only in large events, we may miss God's work in the small ordinary happenings of our daily lives. God is at work in our world, even if we cannot declare with certainty that a particular event is evidence of it.

Another reason may be that God has asked us to live by faith in the messiness of our daily lives and world. We have certainty about God's love for us and our salvation because of Jesus' death on the cross for us. However, when it comes to discipleship in daily life, things are not always so clear. We walk by faith, and faith is more about assurance and hope than it is about certainty. (See "From Scripts to Faith," p. 16.)

- 6.** *What in our story so far might suggest that God will help Esther and the Jewish people?*

What in the story might suggest that God is absent and will not help? What supports do we have when we live in uncertain, ambiguous times?

Esther's Choice

Mordecai persuades Esther. She will disobey the king's rule and risk her life. She now takes charge and commands that Mordecai and all the Jews join her and her maids in a three-day fast. Her identification with her fellow Jews is complete. She will act with *hesed* toward her people. Like the men in the fiery furnace of Daniel 3, she understands that she is risking her life. We should not minimize the heroic nature of her action. Going to see the king may not seem like a grand gesture, yet for Esther it is a life-threatening one.

In the book of Ruth, Boaz disobeys a strict interpretation of God's laws about the Moabites in order to marry Ruth. We see that this disobedience is part of God's plan that eventually leads to the birth of King David and Jesus. Daniel and his friends disobey foolish human laws in order to obey God's law. Esther is also disobeying a foolish human law in order to save her people. These examples suggest that there may be times when God's people must engage in faithful disobedience to human laws.

- 7.** *Is such faithful disobedience to human laws limited to biblical times, or is this something that we as Christians might be called to do today? Explain your answer. If you answered yes, how can Christians discern when such disobedience is necessary?*

Persuaded by Mordecai, Esther begins to plan her act of faithful disobedience.

Esther's Plan

Read Esther 5:1–8. After three days, in loyalty and

solidarity with her people, Esther heroically approaches the king. The NRSV states that she puts on her “royal robes” (5:1). The original Hebrew is more concise, stating that Esther puts on her royalty. She is claiming the full power and dignity of her role as queen.

Esther once again wins the king’s favor. He knows that she must have some strong reason for risking her life and asks what her request is. He promises up to half his kingdom, an exaggeration that no one in the court would take seriously.

Esther then acts in an unexpected way. Mordecai has ordered her to “entreat” and “make supplication” before the king for her people. She is to appeal to his compassion. But when have we ever seen this king have compassion? We have only seen his anger and concern about his honor. Esther believes that appealing to his pity and compassion would be fruitless.

Just as Ruth spontaneously reworked Naomi’s plan and proposed marriage to Boaz, so Esther reworks Mordecai’s plan and proposes a feast for the king and her enemy Haman.

The king and Haman hurry to Esther’s feast (5:5). Once again, the king asks for Esther’s request. Esther responds by reminding the king of their relationship and appealing to his pride and sense of judgment, “If I have won the king’s favor, and if it pleases the king to fulfill my request,” the king and Haman will come to a second feast tomorrow.

- 8.** *Why do you think Esther is postponing asking the king to deliver her people? How would you feel in her situation?*

It may be that Esther is afraid. Or, Esther may realize that the king is easily manipulated. She may want to get him to fully commit himself before making her request. It will be harder for the king to back down if he has made the promise to grant Esther’s request several times.

Haman’s Reaction

Read Esther 5:9–14. Haman is delighted with the honors bestowed upon him—the queen has invited him to a royal banquet twice! However, as soon as he sees Mordecai (5:9), his happiness turns to wrath. At home, he gathers his family and friends and tells them about all the honors of his life, wealth, many sons, promotion to second in the kingdom, and how he has been singled out by Queen Esther to dine alone with her and the king, but that all this seems empty as long as Mordecai is living (5:13). His wife and friends suggest that he build a huge (75 feet high!) gallows and order the king to hang Mordecai on it.

An Ironic Twist of Fate

Read Esther 6:1–6. A series of ironic coincidences and ambiguous silences starts Haman’s downfall and foreshadows the Jews’ salvation. The king, suffering from insomnia, is listening to a servant read from his book of daily records. He remembers that he has not yet rewarded Mordecai for warning him about the assassination plot. At this moment, Haman comes to ask for Mordecai’s death.

The king opens the conversation by asking Haman about honoring someone; he does not say who is to be honored. Haman’s assumption that the king means to honor him, Haman, leads to Haman’s downfall.

- 9.** *List the coincidences in this text. Is this God at work in these events? Explain your answer.*

Royal Honors

In the original Hebrew, there is a pause after the phrase, “for the man whom the king wishes to honor” (6:7). Haman is savoring the words that he believes describe him. He then lists a series of royal honors. Too late, Haman discovers that the king wishes to honor Mordecai, not him, and Haman is forced to lead his enemy’s parade of honor. Instead of killing Mordecai,

man must honor him. Ironically, the king seems be unaware that “the Jew Mordecai who sits at the king’s gate” (6:10) is among the people whose destruction he has decreed. Has he forgotten his own edict? Or does he just not make the connection between the edict and the Jews?

The Great Reversal Begins

When Haman returns home, his wife Zeresh announces, “If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him” (6:13b). Zeresh’s statement is only a manner of speech here; all know that Mordecai is Jewish. In Esther 6:13, the Hebrew word *fall* is used three times, “downfall” and “falling fall,” which the NRSV translates as “surely fall.” The word *fall* is used at several important points in our story.

10. *To trace the important use of the word fall in the action of the book of Esther, complete the following chart. Pay particular attention to who causes an item or person to fall. Where does the use of the word fall shift from being harmful to the Jews to helpful for the Jews? Does this word show God at work? Explain your answer.*

How does Zeresh know this? The text does not tell us. Perhaps she is aware of Genesis 12:3, where God promised Abraham that God would curse all who curse Abraham. Her words are fulfilled in Esther 7:9–10.

Closing Prayer

Gracious healing God,
we praise you for the life and ministry,
death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ,
our risen Lord and Savior.

We thank you
that through your Holy Spirit
and the waters of baptism,
you have claimed us and redeemed us
and made us your own.
Use us as you will to proclaim the good news
of your reign of peace and justice.
May we be visible signs
of your justice and peace in our world.
In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Looking Ahead

By the end of this book, Haman and his 10 sons will be dead, and Esther and Mordecai will institute the joyous festival of Purim. But this comes at a deadly price.

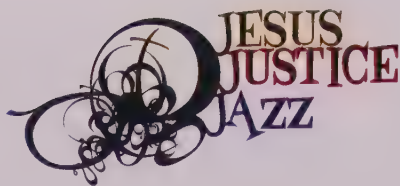
Begin to think about a person in your life who has represented the themes of our study, *hesed* or loving kindness, heroic actions, and God’s hidden hand. Bring reflections, a memento, or a piece of art or craft work that reflect this person’s influence in your life. 🌸

The Rev. Gwen Sayler is a professor of Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. She is a deaconess in the Valparaiso Lutheran deaconess community. **The Rev. Ann Fritschel** is a professor of Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Seminary. She is also the director of the seminary’s Center for Global Theologies.

Verse	Who or what falls	Who causes the fall	Result of the fall
3:7			
6:13			
7:8			
8:3			
8:17			

Lives Shaped by the Cross

by Heidi Hagstrom



The triennial ELCA Youth Gathering, which will take place in New Orleans July 22–26, 2009, is more than a holy party, as some have called it. It's an exercise in Christian discipleship, a super-sized example of the church's commitment to passing on the faith to younger generations.

We believe that New Orleans was presented to us as just such a place and time. We believe it will breathe new life into our commitment to the ministry of the Gathering as a vehicle to teach young people what it means to be the church and to live lives shaped by the cross of Jesus.

Lutheran teens have gathered regularly for well over a century to worship, learn, play, and practice living out their baptismal calling to servanthood. The 36,000 young people and adults who will gather this summer under the theme "Jesus, Justice, Jazz" are preparing for servant school. Through five days of theological reflection, hands-on service, and worship, they will be reminded "to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly" with God (Micah 6:8).

When congregational groups

registered for the 2009 ELCA Youth Gathering, they chose one of six interest areas for their time in New Orleans: housing, environment, the arts and culture, literacy, health and wellness, or wealth and poverty. Youth Gathering staff suggested that groups look around their own community, listen for the groans of the voiceless, pay attention to where their individual and corporate assets met their community's needs, and step up their attentiveness to unmet needs. The staff wanted groups to focus on the community in which they live, asking how their experience in New Orleans might better equip them to serve in their own community.

The youth groups were asked to reflect on two questions: How do you desire, and how do you intend, to become different? How do you desire, and how do you intend, to make a difference?

We also asked groups to listen with others in their congregation and community for God's nudging. This kind of focused, holy listening can be very hard for many of us. We invited groups to map their congregation's assets, to note the energy centers in their congrega-

tion, to identify unmet needs in their congregation's neighborhood, to talk to congregational leaders about their sense of God's intention for the congregation, and to pay attention to how the Spirit was stirring within them during this time of discernment, both as individuals and as a group.

Not as tourists, but as guests

Once a group registered, it was time to start preparing for the experience. Like athletes, followers of Jesus need to get ready to respond fully when the time comes (Matthew 25:1–13). To help the young people prepare, we provided six lessons, to encourage an expectant attitude of faith.

Everything the young people experience in New Orleans will be accompanied by a circle of faith practices: action–reflection–worship and prayer–action. For example, while a group is at work in a service experience, they will be looking for God sightings (Hebrews 9:28). When they reflect on their experience, they will bear witness and become what Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean calls "Godbearers to the assembled community" (see *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, Upper Room Books, Nashville).

Worship and prayer naturally follow as groups give thanks and celebrate God's appearing (2 Timo-

7:4:8). This time of prayer and praise, reflective of the pattern for worship in most ELCA congregations, gives worshipers the opportunity to let go of the need for perfection in discernment and service and sends us back out into the world to continue our faithful service.

In January, groups began to learn about New Orleans as a place of beauty and grace as well as of pain and hurt, as a place where people live, go to school, rear families, go to church, and die, as a place people have called home for generations. If a group does their homework—and data from past gatherings' evaluations shows that participants' experiences are greatly enriched when they do—then they will come to New Orleans less as tourists and more as humble guests who are ready to tune into the host community, to listen for the song of God that is in that place.

Kind of holy jazz

Self-described jazz theologian Dr. Carl Ellis says, "Jazz is more than music; it is a way of thinking and a way of viewing the world. It is about freedom within community." The concept of "freedom within community" is a Gospel truth. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you will be truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31b-32).

One of the goals of the Youth

Gathering is to invite young people to think theologically about their lives and service experiences. Jazz provides a model for that kind of contextualizing. To the untrained ear, a performance by a jazz quartet may sound like chaos. Some may not be able to decipher a melody line; others may wonder how the individual musicians know when to play their solos and why the solos are all different; and yet others may be baffled by how the ensemble ends together. I have learned that a good jazz musician may have much to teach me about the kind of freedom Jesus promised.

Martin Luther wrote in *The Freedom of a Christian* that a Christian should "look only to this object—that he may serve and be useful to others in all that he does, having nothing before his eyes but the necessities and the advantage of his neighbor." A jazz musician must keep an ear to the entire ensemble; he or she must simultaneously listen to the individual musicians and to the music of the ensemble.

Congregational groups that do the work of discernment will come to New Orleans having begun to practice six dimensions of Christian discipleship: compassion, community, advocacy, servanthood, leadership, and vocation. When they encounter an opportunity for serving others and witnessing to the gospel, they will not miss it. They will have

"You are the ones the world has been waiting for." The Rev. Jim Wallis, founder and editor of *Sojourners Magazine*, issued this universal call to justice to the young people who attended the 2006 ELCA Youth Gathering in San Antonio. President Obama has used similar words to call all Americans to what scholar and writer Ralph Ellison calls "the jazz-shaped American life." Both of these leaders could have borrowed Mordecai's words to Esther: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

practiced and been set free for living in a chaotic, broken world eager for the justice, kindness, humility, and compassion. It's a kind of listening to different ensembles of different communities and people to know when and how to jump in as part of the ongoing song and presence of God in New Orleans.

Our young people will return home having experienced a new level of attentiveness to the presence of God in their lives and in the world, and having practiced serving in ways that meet the needs of the community. They will be better equipped to exercise servant leadership within the community of God's people who supported their participation. 🌿

Heidi Hagstrom is director for Youth Gathering in ELCA Vocation and Education.



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Film features courage of Liberian women

Pray the Devil Back to Hell is a film about Liberian women who banded together during the country's civil war and helped bring down a corrupt president. The women, including Leymah Gbowee who has been featured in articles in *Lutheran Woman Today*, took on the Liberian President Charles Taylor and won peace in 2003. Forming a "white" picket line (named for their white T-shirts proclaiming peace), the women—Christians and Muslims alike—demanded an end to the fighting. They are proof that courage and non-violence can succeed where other means fail.

Their demonstrations helped pave the way for the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first female head of state. Visit www.lutheranwomantoday.org to read the articles about Gbowee. Find out more about the film and how to view it by visiting www.praythedevilbacktohell.com.

Combining faith and craft

Bead One, Pray Too (Morehouse Publishing), a how-to guide for making and praying with beads takes novices and accomplished beaders through the steps of creating prayer beads and then learning to use them to enhance their spiritual life. Written by Kimberly Winston, an award-winning religion journalist, the book provides a background to prayer beads from many of the world's religions. It includes history of the prayer beads and their use.

Winston's interest in prayer beads started when she was a young girl.

Although she was brought up in a Protestant tradition, she would slip into a nearby Catholic church and watch "the old Polish and Irish ladies . . . whisper to their beads and kiss them quickly before slipping them back into their pockets." A few years ago, Winston wrote an article about people who combined their hobbies with their faith, hobbies like sewing prayer quilts and knitting prayer shawls. That's when she learned about the Protestant rosary.

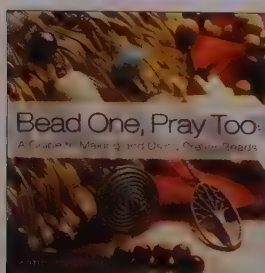
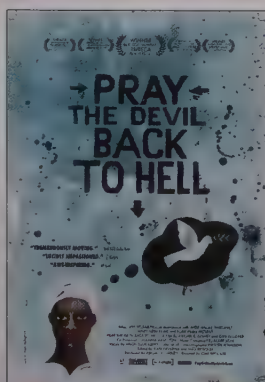
"The same day I learned about this new rosary, I made a quick one. . . . Unsure about this very un-Protestant-seeming thing, I selected very simple prayers. . . . Then I just started to pray, slipping the hard, round beads through my fingers one at a time, one for each repetition of the prayers."

To learn more about the history of prayer beads and making your own, buy her book at your local bookstore or online at www.amazon.com.

Every woman has a story

Lifelines, an on-line global community, is a forum for women all over the world to tell stories about their lives. Any woman can take a few minutes to visit the Web site at www.worldlifelines.org and share. By learning others' stories, women can better understand their different and similar experiences.

The site is sponsored by UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, which provides women's health care and promotes the rights of women around the world.





FACE NOTES

Modern-Day Esthers

Linda Post Bushkofsky



I imagine the women in your life are hard-working, faithful, and compassionate disciples. A few might be heroines, but fewer would claim the title. Once in a while, however, we are privileged to meet a modern-day Esther, a woman who stands up for what she believes in and changes the course of history. I recently met several women who fit this description, Lutheran women in the West African nation of Liberia. To understand them, you need to understand the socio-political landscape of Liberia over the last three decades.

It is hard to describe the enormous effect of the civil war in Liberia. It began in 1980 with a coup and continued, more or less, until 2003. Whole villages were destroyed. The basics of modern life we take for granted—dependable electricity, clean water at the touch of a tap, telephone service—were lost in 1990, and have not yet been restored in most of the country. Few families were left untouched by the war—husbands, fathers, sons were killed, and mothers, daughters, sisters were raped. Barbed wire and shards of glass bristling atop concrete walls are constant reminders of the war, as are the 15,000 United Nations peacekeepers stationed throughout Liberia.

I met the women of St. Luke's parish in Phebe, who received a grant from Women of the ELCA in 2007 for a program of postwar trauma counseling and job skills training. They described how their lives have been changed through the program, helping them cope with their losses and helping them to find a

way to create new lives today. Women of all ages learned soapmaking in the job skills training. Despite their many hardships, these women sang and danced in praise of God.

I met Esther, a Wartburg Seminary graduate who runs the Lutheran Training Institute in remote Lofa County. She has no vehicle or running water, and the generator-supplied electricity runs just five hours a day, but she praises God regularly for the blessings she receives as she oversees vocational training programs for former combatants.

I met Esther and Fossah who, with Leymah, prayed for peace and started a peaceful revolution that led to the end of the war (*LWT* highlighted these women in January/February 2004, "Lutheran Liberian Women Unify for Peace," and again in January/February 2005, "Persistence and Peace"). I met Christian women who continue praying and fasting for peace today.

What makes these Liberian women modern-day Esthers? Like the biblical Esther, they have taken a stand for what is right, they have faced down evil, and they have risked their own lives in seeking change. It's no wonder that so many American Lutheran circles have been named after Esther! My prayer for you is that you and the women of your congregational unit will be willing to take a stand for what is right, that you will be willing to risk as you seek change in meeting our common mission. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

For more about these bold faithful
Lutheran women in the May issue of
Lutheran Woman Today.



AMEN!

Change the World

by Catherine Malotky

There are women, God, who qualify as true heroines. Centuries ago, Esther dared to ask the king to spare the lives of her people. Some 160 years ago, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott fought for women's right to vote. Then 60 years ago, Rosa Parks refused to move back.

We can admire and be inspired by these women. We can share their stories with our daughters. They and so many others are larger than life, braver than brave, and able to change the world.

We might say of ourselves, "I am not the type to change the world." But is this true? The Apostle Paul wrote of the body of Christ to help us see how we are all connected.

The ancients told the story of creation—how we are all fashioned from the earth and called into being by God's very breath. Each of us is made in God's image, partners with God in the creation of the world.

It may be that we can change the world because that is God's intention in creating us.

Perhaps our vision is the problem. I doubt that Esther began her life with the aspiration to save her people. I suspect she was not unlike most of the other Jewish girls in Persia, lovely, but not remarkable in will or courage. She learned to think. She learned to listen and empathize. All good things, then and now.

And then the king picked her. And then Haman offered a bribe. And then

her people were in danger. Circumstances changed. She found herself in a position of power, her influence critical to the survival of so many. Circumstances changed and suddenly, she could change the world.

Dear God, as my life's circumstances change, might I, too, be called to change the world? Might this be my baptismal walk, to watch for opportunities to be your hands, shaping the world around me to reflect your justice and mercy?

Perhaps, God, changing the world need not be dramatic. Perhaps it is the steady faithfulness of raising children who are sure of your love for them and others. Perhaps it is the extra effort it takes to eat local, or turn off the lights, or put the best construction on everything, or work together with others for the greater good. Perhaps it is the resilience it takes to be hopeful. As evidenced by the baby who grew up to be Jesus, many small things can, and do, change the world.

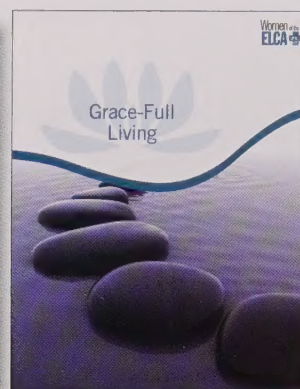
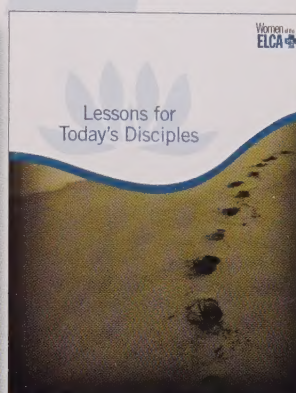
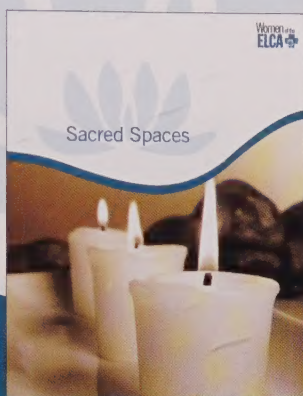
How can I equip myself for this challenge, God? Help me center myself deeply in you and your love. Humble me in my understanding of who you are and what you might desire for our world. Encourage me to think creatively and courageously, and to reach out to others who desire to be your hands. Bless us, as we seek you. Amen. 🙏

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

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